

CHAPTER 5

THE NEED OF A GOLDEN CALF

WE HAVE it on the authority of the Lord, as recorded in Genesis, that idolatry is a corruption far more reprehensible than even the sins of the flesh. But, why? Why is the inveterate habit of humans to worship idols put so low in the scale of values? For answer, let's look to the story of the golden calf.

It will be recalled that Moses had gone up to Sinai for instructions on the management of his tribesmen, and because he had been gone so long about it they gave up on him. So, they turned to Aaron, the second in command, and demanded that he provide them with gods "which shall go before us." That is, they wanted something tangible, sensual and pragmatic to worship, the kind of gods they had seen in Egypt.

A "Thick Cloud"

Moses had given them Jehovah, maintaining that He was the one and only. But this Jehovah, despite the fact that He had done quite well by them in their escape from bondage, turned out to be only an idea. He was intangible, unapproachable, completely out of this world and therefore difficult to comprehend. Even Moses saw Him only as a "thick cloud." When you get right down to it, Jehovah was an abstraction, and an abstraction is elusive; a graven image, like the dome on the capitol in Washington, can be seen and appreciated, and the worship of it is satisfying.

The most irritating thing about Jehovah was His insistence on principles. He would have no truck with expediency, was constantly bringing up long-run consequences, and scolded unmercifully when a fellow gave way to some momentary inclination of the flesh. He enjoined you to keep your eyes off the neighbor's wife and property, gave you no peace when you indulged your appetite for homicide, perjury or adultery.

This was most annoying. Other people had gods quite amenable to amendment; one could not only see and talk to them, one could do business with them. If only their palms were properly greased with sacrifices, they could be depended upon to produce anything you wanted, even social security, and no questions asked. Jehovah, on the other hand, was uncompromising. He laid down His inflexible principles, and you had to go it on your own from there. The best He could offer you was an opportunity—the Promised Land—and if you didn't have sense enough to make use of that opportunity you took the consequences. There was no way of getting around this intractible Jehovah.

Like all the people who came before or after them, the Jews found these undemonstrable absolutes rather confining. They resented having their aspirations restricted by the

natural order of things, their appetites delimited by industry and thrift. They wanted a handout, and on a golden platter. That's what gods are for, and if Jehovah could not or would not deliver on demand, they would set up reasonable gods. Hence, when Moses took an unconscionable time in getting back from Sinai, and they thought they were through with him and Jehovah for good and all, they went pragmatic. They put in an order for gods capable of producing an inexhaustible supply of bread and circuses.

Aaron had no mind to argue with them. Though he is listed in the Bible as a priest, the evidence shows him to have been something of a politician. For one thing, the Lord assigned him to Moses as a spokesman, or rabble-rouser, when the latter pleaded his lack of eloquence as a disqualification for leadership. Aaron was selected because he was not "of a slow tongue." Better proof of his political gift is the way he handled the clamor for the golden calf: he heeded the will of the mob, as a good leader should, and then he taxed them so that he could give them what they wanted. And it was a stiff tax, in those days: "Break off the golden earrings which are in the ears of your wives, and of your sons and daughters, and bring them to me."

Political Expediency for Natural Law

Having produced, out of their substance, the idol of their hearts, Aaron followed the political pattern by declaring a day of thanksgiving: "Tomorrow is a feast to the Lord." (Notice, he wasn't breaking with tradition by denying the Lord, but was insinuating divine sanction for the molten image; just as latter day Aarons are wont to equate democracy with planning.) And the people had bread and circuses, even as in the days of the Caesars and the New Deal. Everything was on a practical and immediate basis, with no thought of consequences. Principles were abolished.

But, were they? Moses had insisted that principles were oblivious of human dicta, that they scoffed at abolitionists and went on operating in their accustomed way. If people presumed to conduct their affairs without regard to principles, they would suffer the consequences. And so, the principles that Aaron arrogantly disregarded continued to plague the Jews. According to the record, Jehovah waxed wroth with these backsliders and determined to wipe out the lot of them. Though we are told that Moses, with a marvelous piece of special pleading, dissuaded the Lord from His fell purpose, the fact is that civil war broke out among the Jews: "and there fell of the people that day about three thousand men."

In modern terminology, we would say that when you substitute political expediency for natural law (which is what idolatry amounts to), you are in for trouble: civilization becomes decadent and declines. The Bible puts it more dramatically: Moses got real sore, broke up the tablets on which the principles were inscribed, and all hell broke loose.

How long this condition continued is not clear, for the Bible is a bit careless about chronology. Judging by what we know about the decline of civilizations, it is a reasonable inference that a number of generations must have come and gone before the Jews recovered from their defiance of fundamental principle; in the Biblical story the whole transition seems to have happened within a few days. At any rate, after the Lord had decimated the tribes, and Moses had put the remnants back on the right track, there was what we call a rebirth of civilization. Or, Moses went up to Sinai, got a new set of tablets, and led his people to the Promised Land.

Like the Jews in the Wilderness

No one, and least of all those who are concerned with reform, will maintain that the human race has as yet reached

the Promised Land. The evidence is all against it. Man has done a lot in accumulating a knowledge of things in general, but he seems incapable of ridding himself of the need of a golden calf. He still yearns for "gods which will go before us," gods that are uninhibited by the laws of nature, gods that are accountable only to our appetites, gods that speak not of consequences or the long run. In that respect we are like the Jews in the wilderness. Witness the pervasive religion of our times, the worship of the State.

Is not the State an idol? Is it not like any graven image into which men have read supernatural powers and super-human capacities? The State can feed us when we are hungry, heal us when we are ill; it can raise wages and lower prices, even at the same time; it can educate our children without cost; it can provide us against the contingencies of old age and amuse us when we are bored; it can give us electricity by passing laws and improve the game of baseball by regulation. What cannot the State do for us if only we have faith in it?

And we have faith. No creed in the history of the world ever captured the hearts and minds of men as has the modern creed of Statism. Men may differ in their rituals, they may call themselves Americans, Englishmen or Russians (New Dealers, Socialists or Communists), but in their adherence to the doctrine of the omnipotence of the State they are as one. It is the universal religion. There may be some who maintain the State is a false god, that it is powerless in the face of natural law, incapable of doing anything the individual cannot do for himself, and is in fact a hindrance to man in his effort toward self-improvement; but such dissidents from the norm are few indeed. From New York to Moscow to Peiping, and all way stations between, men pay homage to the State. It is a universal passion equal in in-

tensity, but much larger in scope, to the spirit of the Crusades.

In the Moslem world, men turn toward Mecca at certain times of the day and pray to Allah according to prescribed rules. In America, all hands are constantly outstretched toward Washington, shamelessly demanding alms, subventions and whatever else their hearts desire, accompanying their prayers with threats of retribution if their supplications be denied. The din of the litany of "gimme" is heard all over the land. School teacher and banker, war veteran and labor union aristocrat, business man and college president, cry out in unison: "Thou who canst do all, do unto me more than thou dost unto others."

The Religion of Statism

And what is Washington but the shrine of the largest golden calf in the world? Here men of all degree come to press their claims on the provider of all things good. Here dwell in splendor the high priests of the church, and those upon whom the graven image grins favorably, while those who have not yet attracted its attention fan their hopes. There is no other occupation in Washington than to propitiate the god of gods. Throughout the day, in its many-tiered houses of worship, splendid in construction and air-conditioned for comfort, high-heeled cattlemen from Texas and high-hatted tycoons from Wall Street vie with one another in obeisances and genuflections; and in the evening, worn out by their devotions, the worshippers foregather at cocktail parties to repair their energies for tomorrow's prayers.

As for the substance of this religion of Statism, the absolute upon which its theology is based, it is that political power can do anything. There is no limitation upon its scope, except a contrary and more potent political power. Of a cer-

tainty, say its theologians, there are no "natural laws" to hamstring the State; that is a well-exploded myth of the dark ages. We have seen, they declare, how through the use of force every so-called immutable consequential relationship has been made mutable and inconsequential. All things are relative. There are no certainties, either in the nature of man or the nature of the world. In fact, there is no nature. Whatever men set their hearts on doing that will be done, provided only that they put their collective powers to the job. And whatever the collective powers of men accomplish, that is "good," simply because it "works." The religion of Statism is thoroughly pragmatic; sufficient unto the day is the accomplishment thereof.

The State is the true god, its votaries maintain, because it is immortal. Men come and go, the State lives on. The priesthood who tend it may be Republicans or Democrats or what-not; the State outlasts them all. It is self-sufficient because it is sovereign, omniscient because it has an intelligence superior to the combined intelligence of all men, beyond censure because its morality transcends that by which mere man lives. It is not a social contract, not the product of a body of laws which men make and unmake. It can say, as the God of the Bible said of Himself—"I Am."

Yet, the State does not say that, or anything else, for it is in fact only a golden calf. We who worship the fiction endow it with superhuman gifts and capacities by merely demanding of it accomplishments that presuppose such gifts and capacities. It is good because we want it to be. Out of the fervency of our prayers comes the State.

Were we to take the trouble to examine the product of our imagination, we would find the State to be only a body of men who, taking advantage of our weakness, make the best of it. They promise; because of our self-deception, we do not question their ability to make good; nor do we take notice of

the contingent clause accompanying the promise, that we give them power over our persons and our property. Because they are human, because they, too, are incapable of defying or circumventing the laws of nature, they cannot do for us what we cannot do for ourselves, and their promise is never fulfilled; but, the power they have acquired is not relinquished. Thus, the State consists of a body of men who, by virtue of our need for a golden calf, acquire the power to compel us to do what we do not want to do.

In the present circumstances, seeing how far we have gone in the worship of the State, we are probably in for a smash-up similar to that which befell the Jews when they asked Aaron for "gods which shall go before us." We could use a Moses to put us on the track of first principles.